

A Major Leap

Jill Johnson shares her vision for interdisciplinary art-making on campus

As the crooning notes of Justin Timberlake's "Don't Hold the Wall" fill the studio, dancers shoot each other excited looks – this is their favorite warm-up song. Grooving to the front of the room, Jill Johnson leads a series of exercises meant to open and strengthen the body. For these college students, these movements also provide a chance to uncurl their fingers and stretch their spines after hours of furious typing.

Many students, dancers and non-dancers alike, have flocked to Johnson's classes in the hopes of re-connecting with their bodies and learning from Johnson's incredible experience with companies such as the National Ballet of Canada, William Forsythe's Ballet Frankfurt, The Paris Opera Ballet, and countless others. Despite her professional training, Johnson works hard to make dance accessible to everyone, including students who have never taken a dance class before. However, she also continues to carve out a space for students who wish to pursue a more serious study of dance within Harvard's curriculum.

With the emergence of the Theater, Dance, & Media concentration, Johnson's role as Dance Director now includes even more responsibility as she advises students hoping to further their study of dance in the classroom as well as the studio. As a dancer concentrating in TDM, I was eager to hear her thoughts on the future of the concentration as well as her own experience teaching at Harvard. It only takes a few minutes to see that although it's been a long time coming, Johnson is eager and optimistic about dance's expanding role at Harvard and beyond. As she puts it, "with this expansion of dance scholarship we'll continue our aim of advancing dance literacy on campus and for the world."

Laurel McCaull: I imagine it is a very different experience working with professional dancers compared to working with college students, who come from a variety of backgrounds and levels. Can you talk about your experience teaching in the college setting versus the professional dance world? How is it difficult, and how is it rewarding?

Jill Johnson: I am deeply inspired by teaching college students and professional dancers – and for me, these two spheres are interconnected. These areas of dance education continually impact, inform, enhance, broaden and evolve my teaching philosophy and programs of study in the form, and collaborations with dancers of all backgrounds and levels of experience in dance.

JJ (cont): Witnessing dance research in action in the classroom, rehearsal studio or the stage is incredibly meaningful and rewarding. Creating a learning environment that fosters and fuels dancers' visceral and cerebral curiosity and deepens their knowledge in ways that empower their self-expression and contributions to the form is a privilege I'm so very lucky to have.

In dance, we articulate the ideas for which there are no words. Differentiating between exquisitely different states, styles and approaches of motion involves time-based practice, and this practice can develop rigor and the ability to address any given moment. The more tools a motion researcher has learned and practiced in his, her or their research – the more articulate they are able to be in service of their self-expression as an artist, as a senator, educator, scientist, architect, applied scientist, neuroscientist, designer, biologist, historian, choreographer, mathematician, director, mayor, or writer.

This is a time-based, analogue practice, and the need for more time for explorations in class or rehearsals emerges as a theme in our field. However, creating something within a finite period of time, whether it is a work-in-progress, draft of a dance film or fully wrought installation work, is an essential component to the real stakes of presenting a work. And this perceived limitation can be leveraged as a valuable tool for accomplishing great things!

LM: In the Harvard Dance Project's most recent show, "What Moves You?," text and dance were combined to create a multimedia performance. Have you worked with this type of method before? What do you think is the benefit to interweaving text and movement? What comes first? Is one more limiting than the other?

JJ: For me, interdisciplinary work holds a rich scope of possibilities for collaboration. I've had the great fortune of being exposed to a wide range of exceptional interdisciplinary works by dance, theater and music visionaries while I worked and toured in Canada, America, Europe, Asia, the Middle East and Australia – and I've been greatly influenced by this experience over the last three decades.

What I find interesting is to examine how structures of making dances might be dismantled and reassembled in order to cultivate meaningful interactions and resonance with audiences in the 21st century.

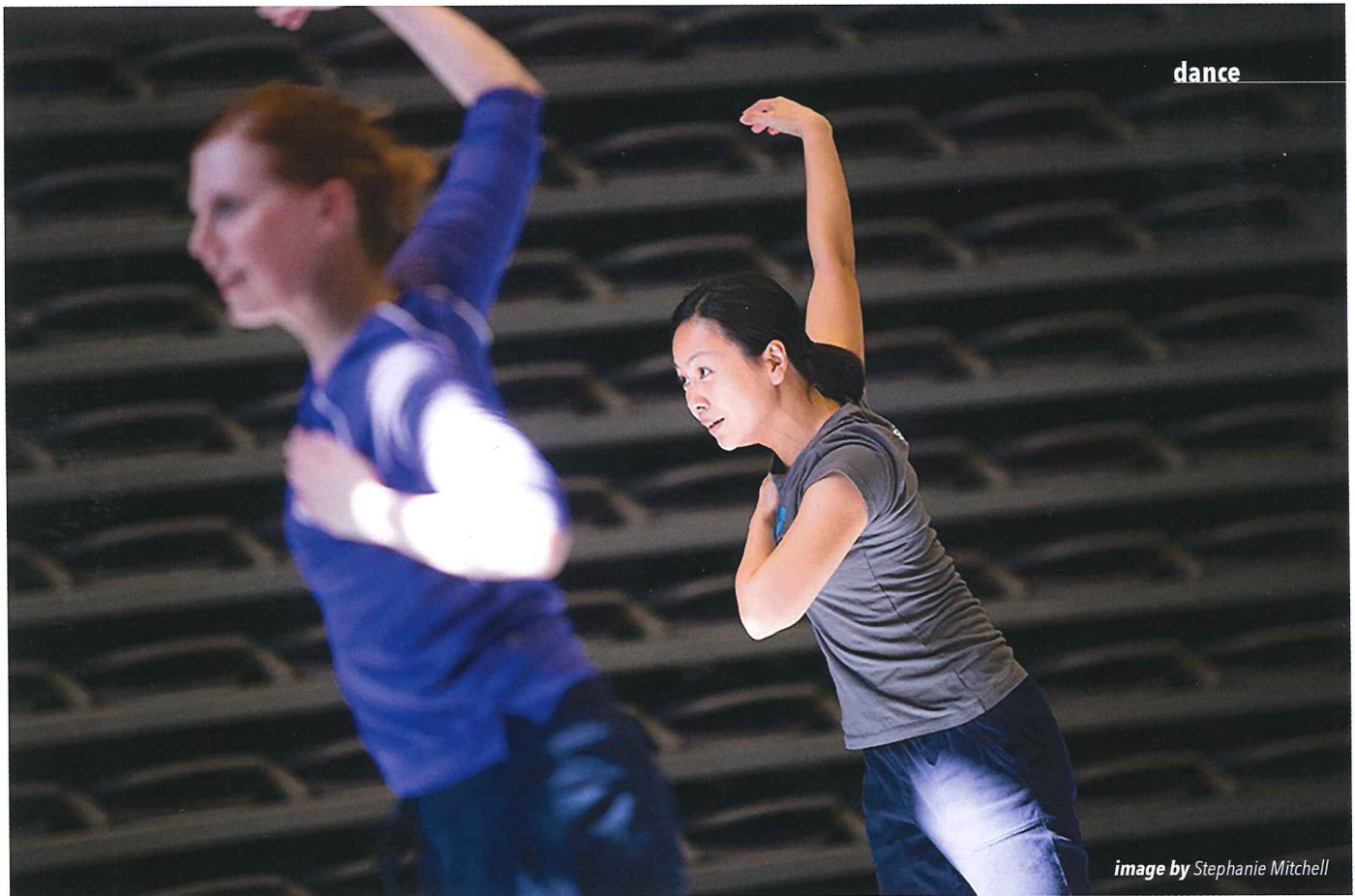


image by Stephanie Mitchell

JJ (con't): Interdisciplinary works allow us to expand the possibilities for creating and presenting dance, theater and other hybrid forms of time-based performance art in ways that can advance and expand the options in these fields. This in turn can help promote relevancy and solvency in arts organizations and in arts scholarship.

A wordless medium, mostly invented and taught by demonstration, the field of dance is constantly inventing new ways to describe itself, even in the most venerated theaters, museums and platforms. We are in a world of hybrid practices of business and hyphenated skill-sets and job opportunities. Dance, in my view, should take this into consideration and seek out ways to reflect this worldview in compelling ways. Questions I ask with my collaborators in creative process are: How might we create new understandings of what it means to create, present and study dance in the 21st century? What kind of dance do people want to see in the current culture, and why? How do we set about considering these questions? There isn't a specific order to when or how I use multiple platforms. In my experience thus far, each piece uses choreographic thinking in a singular way that serves it in distinctive ways. Often times, I begin with a text or a piece of music that anchors an idea or state of being to explore into.

LM: Dance is often so ephemeral – other than possible choreographic notes, there rarely remains a text version of a dance performance. How do you think this intrinsic aspect of dance will affect how it is taught to students who may not necessarily have a dance background? Is there a way to “textualize” dance, or at a certain point do you need to move to truly understand it?

JJ: In dance, specific movements are our language; transitions, our grammar and syntax; and choreography is authorship. Choreography is our text – watching dance is “reading” dance – performances are our published works. Dance can be discovered in many different ways. For example, through motion, the written word, watching a performance, or on digital media platforms. In my view, regardless of a student's level of exposure to the form, their point of entry for learning about dance can begin with the amalgamation of their unique experience in their own body and specific dance research that excites them. Creating the learning conditions that allow students to be moved by the experience of the non-verbal communication that dance affords is a part of gaining knowledge in and about the form.

LM: As of now, TDM is heavily theory-based. How important do you think it is for students to study dance theory? Are there any particular dance theorists that you feel have influenced your work?

JJ: Dancers, choreographers and dance educators are theorists and philosophers in my view. Many of these colleagues have also written about dance: Ander Zabala, Bebe Miller, Christopher Roman, Dana Caspersen, Denise Jefferson, Desmond Richardson, Jone San Martin, Liz Lerman, Ludmilla Pagliero, Norah Zuniga-Shaw, Sergiu Stefanschi, William Forsythe. Additionally, these dance scholars are important voices in the field: Dr. Brenda Dixon Gottschild, Brian Massumi, Erin Manning, Lynn Garafola, Mark Franko, VK Preston.

To my mind, relevant scholarship in dance engages in substantive practice, dialogue, discussion, and analysis in the form in ways that are inextricably connected to so many areas of practice. For example, if dance theory is linked with the theories of art and art history, architecture, design, theater, music, sociology, anthropology, science, politics, law, business, medicine, to name a few, then it offers scholarship that at once considers deeply history, context and our current culture, and the possibilities for the future of the form.

LM: Where do you draw inspiration when you choreograph? Are there any texts or authors that particularly speak to you?

JJ: People and their stories; literary works, nature, and music are chief amongst points of departure for my choreographic ideas – but really, anything can be of inspiration and departure for creating a work. I enjoy connecting whatever I'm drawn to during a creation period (which can be anything from architecture, a political issue, new record, poem, or an image) with points of inspiration I already have in mind for a project – and from there, together with my collaborators, discovering ways to communicate distinct choreographic ideas from these resources.

To name a few sources of inspiration here, Antony Gormley, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, David Poe, Jack Whitten, Jorie Graham, Maya Angelou, Naomi Klein, Rumi, Sir Ken Robinson, Stephen Greenblatt, Ta-Nehisi Coates, *The Onion*.

LM: How do you see dance developing as a curriculum here at Harvard? What are the challenges facing the dance department as it tries to establish itself within this extremely academically focused institution?

JJ: The TDM concentration supports the growth of dance studies in very exciting ways. We could not have reached this point of expansion in dance scholarship were it not for the support, leadership and partnership with colleagues and scholars across the University – the generous support of President Faust chief amongst other esteemed colleagues such as Dean Sorensen and new Dean of Arts & Humanities Robin Kelsey, Dean Robb Moss, and TDM Chair Martin Puchner, to name a few. Hiring a new Lecturer in Dance is an important and thrilling part of the development of academic dance course offerings.

Dance continuously oscillates between history, theory and practice. It is a field that does not need a boundary between these areas of study, nor is dance a finished project – we don't yet know all there is to know about dance. At TDM, we have the thrilling task of populating our academic courses of study with content and artists that allow students to create, analyze, discuss and write about theater, dance and media in dynamic and rigorous ways that will allow them to thrive and be art scholars and inventors at college and in their careers to come.

We'll continue to offer students in-depth and extraordinary experiences with dance luminaries in the creation of new dance works, grow the roster of dance courses in TDM, and foster and deepen interdisciplinary connections and collaborations at the University within TDM and with departments and programs such as The Mahindra Humanities Center, Arts at 29 Garden, A.R.T., Physics, VES and CCVA, Applied Science, Music, The Museums, GSD, Biology, English, to name a few.

We believe that dance is an important part of educating a whole person. No matter the level of experience, exposure, or economic means, our focus at the Dance Center is on the student experience and empowering tomorrow's artists, innovators and leaders. Now, as ever, from community classes and master classes to student groups and the Theater, Dance and Media concentration, Harvard Dance seeks to deliver a transformative experience for students and audiences.

The Dance Center's sustained aim is to be a site for academic and civic leadership, and meaningful community engagement through dance and the arts – on campus, in our greater Cambridge and Boston communities and beyond them. It is a space that provides inclusivity, research, reflection, dialogue, expression and innovation. This is a site that leads through equality and dignity for all and aims to foster agency through dance and promote the arts as agents of social change in the world. **TDM**

Interview by Laurell McCaull for TDM Magazine



image by Ronnie Smith